

A CENTURY OF GREATNESS :

St. Peter's Parish, New Westminster

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« On September 13th, 1860 we were able to establish a mission at New Westminster... I have... put Father Fouquet in charge of this important mission. » With these words, Father D'Herbomez, Oblate Superior of the Pacific Coast, recorded the founding of the parish of St. Peter's, New Westminster, now celebrating its one hundredth anniversary.

Father Fouquet left his own record of those thrilling pioneer days when he named his companions in the venture; « In September, 1860, (Father D'Herbomez) sent Father Grandidier, myself and Brothers Blanchet and Janin to the Fraser. » The four of them rolled up their sleeves and went to work on the gummy banks of the Fraser, « felling gigantic trees many of which measured... nine feet in diameter at the base ».

The two Brothers, with a speed that betrayed their zest for the job, threw up a log building — the church and residence. There is no doubt that it was a veritable wilderness. One astonished bystander protested. « You priests cannot live here! What will you eat? ».

« The streams will supply us with fish and the earth will give us potatoes », Father D'Herbomez replied. *« Anyone who is not satisfied with fish and potatoes has no right to call himself a missionary. »*

The fish and potato stage has long passed and the gigantic trees have all been felled, but Father Wilfred MALLOY, O.M.I., and staff of Oblate priests and Brothers are steeped in the spirit and drive of those trail blazing Oblates of the early days. St. Peter's is a big city parish now. The primitive trails are replaced by shinning highways. The brown log cabin has given way to successive churches till the present gleaming-white St. Peter's which stops the eye of motorists on the multilane thoroughfare of Royal Avenue. The Oblates of St. Peter's have been builders; builders of churches, of St. Louis College, St. Patrick's Hall, Dontenwill Hall, St. Peter's School. They have been primarily missionaries and, although the woods are gone, the *« woods »* of the modern city are still full of the souls they are there to ferret out and care for. And so it is a familiar sight to the people of New Westminster to see the Oblate missionaries of today pounding their beats up and down the coronary climbs that are the hills of New Westminster. The beloved priests and brothers of St. Peter's; everyone knows them, everyone salutes them!

While this story is running through the presses in Ottawa, New Westminster will be in the midst of festivities to mark the one hundred years of the Oblate Fathers at St. Peter's. There will be a Pontifical High Mass in the magnificently remodeled interior of St. Peter's. There will be a splendid pageant to re-enact the great deeds of the great Oblates of other years. A Sister of St. Ann, one of those wonderful women who have shared the missions and supplemented the work of the Oblates, has written it. Father RALPH BERNARD, O.M.I., having

sweated his way through anxious rehearsals as director, will be watching from the wings as the best of the talent of St. Peter's acts out the story of the missionaries of those fish and potato days. And they will have to be good, too. « *Brother Joe* » will be there, full of pep, bouncing down the aisle of Don-tenwill Hall; those bright eyes sparkling, pockets crammed with candy for the children, to evaluate their performance. You see, he doesn't just know St. Peter's history; he has lived it! In fact anniversaries at St. Peter's parish, well, Brother Joe collects them. He was already eight years at St. Peter's when the fiftieth anniversary was celebrated, in 1910. At eighty-five he has a good number of his own.

The celebrations will be richer and more meaningful with men like Brother Joe and Father Stephen Murphy. Father Murphy came to New Westminster in 1915 as Rector of St. Louis College. He stayed on to become pastor from 1926 to 1932. Then he just stayed on and on, sharing his wonderful priestly qualities and his delightful wit with his Oblate community and the people of St. Peter's. No one has told us how long Brother Gallagher has been a part of St. Peter's, but neither has anyone any recollection of a time when he was not. He too will be in the audience, remembering.

St. Peter's parish started as the home base for St. Charles Mission, the birthplace of all missionary endeavours in the interior. It took in all the Fraser Valley, « *from the Cascades to the ocean..., the territory dependent thereon and several Indian villages on the Coast... with New Westminster as centre and Port Douglas, Fort Hope and Fort Yale as outposts* ». Within a year of the founding of the mission, the Lillooet and the Cariboo districts became parts of this vast mission field.

In 1861 they built two churches. The larger one measured 20' x 40' and was situated on a primitive

trail which later became Columbia street. It was for the white population. It was blessed by Bishop Demers on July 14, 1861 and dedicated to St. Peter. The Indian church of St. Charles was built « 300 yards up the hill and on the edge of the forest ». They were given a church of their own for a very practical reason; first of all practically all of them knew no English and, more important, they needed a church of their own in which all day long for two or three weeks at a time, they could learn their Catechism and prayers without being bothered by intruders.

In January 1861 Father Fouquet estimated that there were approximately 200 whitemen and some 4,000 Indians in St. Charles mission, a figure which was soon revised upwards. The first missionaries to visit certain Mainland tribes *« found them well disposed »* but, in 1860, *« after their contact with unprincipled whitemen they were in a state worse than barbarism »*. He wrote: *« An immorality which would have made Sodom and Gomorrha blush ... had infected them with horrible corruption. They had learned to add to their own coarse vices the foul practices which accompany the scum of a degraded civilization. Whitemen without consciences poisoned them with what they called liquor but which was really a concoction of alcohol, camphor and tobacco juice. Drunken Indians were to be seen everywhere. From what I have seen in the last six months, I can state that of a thousand Indians there are not a hundred who do not drink to excess. Many are never sober. You could see them in bands fighting and killing one another and howling like beasts all the while. In New Westminster, two were murdered in one night and in their camps ... it is still more horrible: brother kills brother and drunken fathers stab their harmless infants. »*

With zeal and energy Fathers Fouquet and Gran-

didier stormed against the evils of drink and fearlessly attacked those who, for gain or immoral purposes, supplied liquor to native men and women. From Saanich the priests brought exemplary converts who, with the priests, made camp after camp realize what misery, suffering, poverty, disease and crime the abuse of liquor was causing. Every camp but one was convinced and practically every Indian took the pledge to abstain from liquor. Father Fouquet was able to report that, whereas in the past 99 Indians out of a hundred had been addicted to liquor, now these figures were reversed. By August 1863, 4,000 Indians had become loyal members of the Temperance Society.

The saloon keepers were purple with rage and during a procession on Easter Sunday, 1861, pelted Father Grandidier with rotten eggs. The whites were indignant at the disrespect and the Indians were so enraged that it was with great difficulty that they were prevented from burning down the « rum houses ». Governor Douglas called on the priest with Chief Justice Begbie and Judge O'Reilly, expressing their regrets and complimenting him on the success of the Temperance Crusade.

The few priests were very hard worked. Father Fouquet describes his Sunday work at St. Peter's: « *March 9, 1861 — 8 o'clock, Confession, Mass and sermon for the Indians; 11 o'clock, Mass and lecture for the whites; 1 p.m. instruction for the Indians; 3 p.m. Rosary for the whites; 6 p.m. Temperance meeting for the Musqueams; 7 to 9 p.m. similar meeting for the Sauamish. Between these services there were many matters to attend to.* »

In 1862, immigrants brought smallpox from California and almost killed off the Indians. These poor people were driven from the white centres so that at Victoria, for instance, « *the ground of the surrounding woods was ... white with the blanch-*

ed bones of the victims of smallpox ... At first, corpses were hurriedly buried ... but soon the dead had to be left where they fell ... the southern part of New Caledonia (was) almost converted ... into an immense graveyard. »

Alfred Waddington wrote: *« I myself saw the graves of perhaps 500 Indians ... two whitemen ... stealthily gathered the blankets of the dead and sold them to the (Chilcotin) Indians — thus causing a second visitation of the plague which carried off the second third of the native population. »*

The Oblate missionaries flew to the aid of the stricken Indians. Father Fouquet wrote: *« We have done our utmost to save them. Father Pandosy has vaccinated thousands of them and I did the same for about 8,000. I sent vaccine to Father Chirouse and he made good use of it as did also Father Durieu. »*

In 1864, the new Governor, wishing to celebrate the Queen's birthday with greater pomp than ever, asked the missionaries to bring as many Indians as possible. To his complete gratification a well-organized flotilla of 700 canoes arrived with 3,500 singing Indians headed by 57 Chiefs and Fathers Fouquet, Grandidier and Gendre and accompanied by St. Mary's Indian School brass band. The colourful group marched to the Governor's residence behind 60 stalwart men proudly carrying the Temperance flags (*« a red cross on a white field bordered in gold and displaying the words, Religion, Temperance, Civilization »*) which indicated that the 60 camps had remained faithful to their pledge to abstain from liquor.

After introducing the Chiefs, Father Fouquet translated the speeches three of them made and then the Governor's reply. To quote Father Gendre: *« You should have seen the Indians' mouths open and their eyes pop when the Great White Chief,*

resplendent in his uniform and surrounded by a Guard of Honour, made the embarrassed Father Fouquet, in a battered old hat, take the place of honour at his right. » The Indians were surprised because interested parties had circulated a story to the effect that the new Governor would do nothing for the Indians who listened to the priests!

An even more impressive ceremony took place the following October when Father, now Bishop, D'Herbomez, was installed in St. Charles Church as Vicar Apostolic of the mainland. Within five years he had gone as far north as Babine Lake and had blessed 55 churches or chapels, two colleges and several other institutions.

If practically all these churches were only poor log cabins, the Bishop's « *Palace* » and « *Cathedral* » were little better. When asked to build something less uncomfortable than what served as the Oblate residence, he replied, « Not until I build a church at Mission and a school at New Westminster ».

Within a year the Sisters of St. Ann had opened an Academy for girls and the Oblates had founded St. Louis College.

In October 1865, Father Edward Horris, just over from Ireland, came to New Westminster to teach, with Brother Allen, at the newly opened St. Louis College. Early in 1868 he was relieved of most of his classes so as « *to organize St. Peter's parish* » which, up to that time, had been little more than one of the missions. Like most of the overworked missionaries, he was soon burdened with extra jobs. He became Vicarial Bursar, Rector of the College and Chaplain to the hospital, academy and jail. In 1889, suffering from overwork and amnesia he was sent home to Ireland for his health. He died there four years later.

In 1882, his duties as parish priest, Rector and Bursar had been taken over by Father James M.

McGuckin, an Irishman who had already distinguished himself as the Founder and Rector of a college at Williams Lake in the Cariboo. In 1883 he built the imposing church on Blackwood street which was to serve the parish until 1934.

In 1889 Father McGuckin was called by the Superior General to Ottawa to the post of Rector of Ottawa University. He had been the « pillar of our diocesan work ». Nine years later he was to return to the West where he built what is now Holy Rosary Cathedral in Vancouver. He died shortly after celebrating Mass on April 7, 1903.

In 1875 the ailing Bishop D'Herbomez was given a Co-adjutor when Father Durieu was Consecrated Bishop. Bishop Durieu carried on the exacting field work, while D'Herbomez administered the Diocese from his sick room.

In 1890 the pioneer Bishop died unexpectedly. Bishop Durieu and several other priests were preaching a mission at the blessing of the beautiful new Sechelt church at the time. Bishop Durieu, some of the priests, and representatives from the Indians, went to New Westminster. The Indians took the body of Bishop D'Herbomez to St. Charles Church where they spent the night in tears and prayer. On the morrow they sang a Requiem Mass after which another was sung in St. Peter's Cathedral filled and surrounded by huge crowds of every denomination. In the city all flags were at half mast. A special train took the body and mourners to St. Mary's Mission, where the Bishop was buried.

Fathers Guertin, Ouellette and Morgan filled the post of pastor during the next decade.

During this decade too, the very popular Father Dontenwill was consecrated Bishop, on August 22, 1897 and on the feast of the Blessed Sacrament, 1899, Bishop Durieu passed to his reward. He had centered his life on the Blessed Sacrament and had taught

his Indians to do the same. When the official pallbearers were about to take the coffin from the train at Mission, the Indians pushed them aside, saying, « Give him to us, He is ours ».

Until he became Archbishop of Vancouver and, a few days later, Superior General of the Oblates in September 1908, Bishop Dontenwill ruled the Diocese from St. Peter's with great zeal and charity.

Father Emile Bunoz was put in charge of the parish in 1900 and remained till he was sent to the Yukon in 1902. He was later made the first Bishop of Prince Rupert.

Father John O'Neill was pastor from that time till 1906 when Father William O'Boyle succeeded him. The later is largely responsible for establishing the French-speaking community of Maillardville near New Westminster.

Father Felix Beck was pastor through the difficult war years from 1913 to 1922. It was during his time that it became impossible to finance St. Louis College and the famous school was closed. Father Salles then became pastor till the time of Father Stephen Murphy mentioned above.

Father B. J. Kennedy became pastor in 1932 and Father Daniel McCullough in 1933. During Father McCullough's pastorate St. Peter's Church was so damaged during a storm that it had to be closed. For almost five years the parishioners crowded into the cramped quarters of St. Patrick's Hall.

When he took charge of the parish in 1937, the hardworking and capable Father William Loftus, a carpenter in his own right, decided to build a church, although many parishioners were out of work. By careful planning, by watching every cent, by shopping around for good material at the lowest prices, by his inspirational leadership and thanks to contributions which in many cases meant great

sacrifices, he and his volunteer labourers build the beautiful church on Royal Avenue. He also built Dontenwill Hall after St. Patrick's Hall was gutted by fire.

Father Patrick Phelan, Father Louis Keighley and Father Leo Sweeney succeeded in turn to the Pastorate of St. Peter's. They were men who were most devoted to their people and won their devotion in return. They had to grapple with the problems that are common to parish life the building of a school and rectory, the reduction of debt. They also carried on the spiritual works of the ministry in the best traditions of the great Oblates who preceded them.

As this panorama of history unfolds on the stage of Dontenwill Hall, Father Malloy, his Oblates staff and the people of St. Peter's parish can look back with pride on a parish with a tradition of greatness, the cradle of the Faith in British Columbia and the parish from which St. Peter's Province of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, proudly takes its name.